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Larry James

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DOING JUSTICE, PRACTICING COMPASSION

 The Care Corps
at Richardson East

Larry James

Moving from theory to practice often produces revolution. When a local church takes this crucial step in regard to the issues of justice and compassion, fundamental ("radical" is not too strong a word) change occurs. Our experience at Richardson East serves as a good test case. In 1980 the congregation's annual financial commitment to easing the pain of poor, hurting, homeless persons totaled \$1,500. No formal, organized ministry existed. Leadership in a very caring church expressed little or no concern for the plight of the poor in our area. During the last eight years, a genuine transformation occurred. Since 1981, the congregation budgeted and spent well over \$160,000 in direct assistance to the poor. The process of transformation involved us in the fascinating and convicting journey of rediscovering people, both in life and in scripture, so that genuine ministry could be done. As a result, concern for the poor, the homeless, the stranger, and the hungry now occupies a central place in the church's heart.

Facing People

The first year of the Reagan administration brought an incredible number of "needy" individuals and families through the doors of our church building. Since the church had no formal strategy for serving the poor, the church staff attempted to care for needs case by case. By 1984 the task overwhelmed us. Burnout set in. Cynicism threatened to take us by storm! The needs often broke our hearts, yet our personal energies began to fail. For three years we looked into the eyes of desperate people, cons, folks who needed just a little boost, suicidal and hopeless people, and a host of hard core survivors. One Thursday afternoon I broke. My

secretary ushered the third complicated "case" of the day into my office. Study time was ruined! Frustration bubbled in my stomach and throbbed in the back of my neck. I "handled" the problem, as quickly as possible, resenting every moment of it. Back at my books thirty minutes later, a vision appeared of the little girl I had just rushed through my office, along with her mother and father. She deserved much more and better than I provided. I remember my tears. I saw her, but only after she was gone.

Facing Scripture

Telling the story of God's commitment to seeing justice done and compassion extended in the world and among his people occupied my preaching from the beginning of my ministry at Richardson East in the mid-1980's. Moving from an inner-city church in New Orleans to an affluent church in suburban Dallas, I felt driven to speak for the poor, possibly out of personal guilt as much as any other motivation. Unable to release the burden I felt for poor people, I preached the prophets and Luke continually. We worked through every "poverty passage" in Luke's gospel. We labored over Amos. A good friend and I taught "justice material" to our teenagers. Our church staff got tired, I am certain, of my rambling week after week in our study times about the physical needs of people being the essence of "Kingdom work." Our youth ministry led the way for the church in retreats, service projects, lock-ins, and fasts, all focusing on the concerns of justice and compassion. At every opportunity I shared my heart with our elders who, as always, listened with great patience, toleration, and openness. The vision created by God's story as taught and acted out, opened the door to the poor who passed our building. The teaching process continued for three or four years at the same time the staff's frustration and conviction grew.

A New Day

In 1984 we changed. A congregation, saturated with teaching, intersected a staff consumed by

Larry James is the Pulpit Minister for the Richardson East Church of Christ, Richardson, Texas. He is a Harding graduate, and is currently finishing a doctorate from Tulane University.

the needs of an ever increasing number of "walk ins." The result: a new ministry formally organized as "Care Corps." With our history in mind the conception and gestation of this special ministry seems simple today. The church staff faced its limitations. I planned and preached a series of five sermons designed to focus and refine our call to care for the poor. Each sermon invited involvement and promised training. When the series ended, we announced the formation of Care Corps as a response to God's clear call to side with the poor. We enlisted volunteers who agreed to attend a six-week training seminar. The fifty or so volunteers worked hard with the training and procedures manual we designed to prepare care givers for face-to-face encounters with poor people.

Our journey since that exciting beginning has been one of growth, disappointment, reorganization, struggle, joy, and genuine service. At present an amazing woman, Ethelyn English, provides overall leadership and direction for this crucial ministry. Ongoing training, monthly scheduling of workers, coordination of the distribution of government commodities, work with our area food bank, active interfacing with other helping agencies in the community, and long-range planning and dreaming passes under her watchful eye as some sixty volunteers serve the poor.

Care Corps injects an indescribable spirit into our fellowship. The poor literally never leave our sight. We know we must travel further, but we are a changed people. Our challenge today involves avoiding the temptation to institutionalize caring for people who battle poverty, finding ways to invite the people we serve into the fullness of life in Christ, and changing the structures of our community and nation which keep the poor in positions of disadvantage.

A Strategy to Consider

Let me conclude and briefly recap by offering a possible strategy to pursue for any church leader who shares God's concern for those in need of justice and compassion.

Step one: begin with the story. Church leaders should study Luke's gospel, as well as Amos, the other 8th century prophets, Acts, and James. A careful topical and lexical investigation of justice, compassion, and poverty would serve leaders well. Our churches need a theology of ministry which links personal conversion to a genuine concern for the poor and dispossessed. To walk with Jesus forces us to be preoccupied with the problems people face today. We

must understand ourselves and our mission in terms of God's program in history. The call of the Kingdom invades our lives as a demanding, narrow, anti-cultural power. As the call grows clearer, you will begin to draw part of your identity from the needs perceived in the community, and even more from the specific needs of individuals encountered together. Be patient. Avoid unproductive, guilt-stirring rhetoric. Preach compassion and justice as you stand under the Cross. Never compromise the centrality of Calvary to every action of ministry you plan or suggest.

Step two: touch the poor. Find the poor. Face the poor. Shun isolation. Proximity to the world overcomes hardness of heart. Perform simple acts of practical compassion in behalf of people in need. Allow your church to offer the community an open door by being an open-hearted person yourself. Realize your commitment to the poor must cost you personally before it will ever become the commitment of your church.

Step three: Bring theology and the example of your leadership together by developing an approach to invoking volunteers in delivering services. Call for commitments. Expect disciples to be people of justice and compassion. Teach people to care. Be tender, but persistent. Implement a plan for ministry to the poor where you live. Recruit. Train. Organize. Serve. Start.

Step four: Tell the church what is happening. Tell the story God gives you as you serve together. Rehearse the mighty acts of God among the poor. Challenge the church to recognize just how much it needs the poor. Begin to deepen your theology by discussing simplicity and lifestyle,

the idolatry of materialism, and God's special commitment to the poor.

Step five: couple your attempts to serve with prayer and spiritual formation. The needs of our world overwhelm us unless we maintain a spiritual lifeline with the Father of every good and perfect gift. Compassion and prayer fit naturally together while protecting you from legalism and false schemes of redemption.

The Long Haul

Our congregational identity can no longer be separated from commitment to care for poor people. No one debates the issue. Our mission is settled: **we seek**

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to share Christ and meet human needs. Kingdom work demands our very best. At times we give much less than our best. But as Edd Eason, minister of family at Richardson East, often says, "If it is worth

doing, it is worth doing poorly." In other words, we face our limitations and often come up short of perfection in meeting needs, but we refuse to lose sight of our vision. We keep trying. We focus on what we can do rather than being stopped by what we cannot do.

The results continue to surprise us. Inactive and spiritually lethargic members find new life at the feet of poor people. The community tells our story everywhere, and as a result, opportunities for meaningful public witness before a skeptical society continue to come our way. The church receives pointed reminders about the dangers inherent in our consumer-oriented, materialistic culture. Most important, people in need discover hope, a reason to keep living, and Jesus in the faces of compassionate Christians. Care Corps challenges us to become a genuine counter-culture in a world which, after all, is not our home.

The CARE Corps

The Care Corps served over 658 people in the first quarter of 1990. Their services include food assistance, occasional assistance with rent, utilities, and prescriptions, and advice and referral related to other social services available. They are open five days a week from 12-3:00 PM.

The above facts are the vital statistics of Care Corps. But they do not begin to tell the story of the ministry that takes place at Richardson East. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of their ministry is that it is staffed by over fifty different volunteer church members. Each caring member is given training to help them in interviewing and assessing client needs. The sheer number of members involved insures that this ministry remains a visible part of the congregation's identity. This allows for more than just service to the community. It revives the congregation spiritually as the "mighty acts of God" are rehearsed weekly in the lives touched by this ministry.

The success of Care Corps is due in part to the efforts of Ethylin English, the director of Care Corps, in her involvement with organizations such as the Greater Dallas Community of Churches, and the Hunger Task Force. Care Corps is also an outlet for the distribution of USDA commodities. Because of cooperative ventures such as these, Richardson East is widely known as a compassionate group of believers.

In all of the training literature given to Care Corps volunteers it is stressed that the ultimate goal of their assistance is conversion. They see their ministry as an outpouring of the salvation that God offers in Jesus.